Rituparna Roy*

Charulata 2011: Dramatizing the Glocal

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Abstract: A lonely wife in Kolkata and a bachelor in London have a virtual affair, but are forced to re-think their relationship when they discover he is her brother-in-law. *Charulata 2011* is an ingenious post-millennial adaptation of Tagore's novella, *Nastanir* (The Broken Nest, 1901), already immortalized by Satyajit Ray in his classic *Charulata* (1964). This intertextuality, especially with Ray, lends an added dimension to the film, allowing Chatterjee to contrast two modernities in Bengal – the colonial and glocal – over the course of a century. Both these women gain temporary respite from their suffocating marriage through an affair, but their circumstances are vastly different. While Tagore/Ray's heroine (like Anna Karenina, Madame Bovary and Lady Chatterley) could only bond with a man she knew, technology expands Charulata's choice in 2011. She romances the strange and the unknown – an unseen tall dark stranger with a gift for words. While the nineteenth century Bengali heroine had to reign in her erotic impulse, her twenty-first century counterpart submits to it, though with an overwhelming sense of guilt. But there are similarities too – both are childless homemakers; have a literary sensibility; and though a 100 years apart, in both their cases, the lover eventually departs, and duty ultimately wins over passion, bringing back the duly chastened wife to the wronged husband. *Charulata 2011* thus dramatizes a glocalized South Asian narrative, where the protagonist negotiates an uneasy juxtaposition of a globalized outlook on the world with the entrapment of age-old social obligations in her self.

Keywords: colonial modernity, glocalization, adaptation, intertexuality, virtual relationship

***Corresponding author: Rituparna Roy,** Department of English, The Heritage College, Chowbaga Road, Anandapur, Kolkata 700107, India; Udichi Co-operative Housing Society, Flat – B18, P-27/1, C.I.T. Road, Scheme – VII/M, Kankurgachi, Kolkata, West Bengal 70005, India.
E-mail: rituparna_sandilya@yahoo.co.in

1 *Charulata 2011*: Dramatizing the glocal

Charulata 2011[1] is a double tribute – it is most obviously a tribute to Satyajit Ray's 1964 film *Charulata*,[2] but is also a tribute to Rabindranath Tagore. It came out in 2012, a year after Tagore's 150th birth anniversary celebrations. Interestingly, three Bengali films that released that year were inspired by or adapted from texts by Tagore – *Chitrangada: The Crowning Wish* by Rituporno Ghosh[3]; *Tasher Desh* [The Land of Cards] by Q (Qaushiq Mukherjee)[4] and *Charulata 2011* by Agnidev Chatterjee. What is notable about these films is that none of them are directly based upon Tagore's work. *Tasher Desh* is a post-modern fantasy, while Ghosh's *Chitrangada* is an adaptation of an adaptation, and so is *Charulata 2011*. Ghosh's film is an adaptation of a dance drama, which was itself an adaptation from an epic (The Mahabharata), while Chatterjee's film is an adaptation of another film based on a novella. It is thus necessary to briefly describe the story of Tagore used by Ray before we venture into a detailed analysis of Chatterjee's film, demonstrating how the latter dramatizes the glocal. But first, we need to take a look at colonial modernity in Bengal and the transformation it wrought in women's lives – as Charulata was one of its beneficiaries.

2 Colonial modernity in Bengal

The cultural reawakening that was the Renaissance in Bengal covered the entire nineteenth century.[5] While on the one hand it led to an unprecedented intellectual flowering that was reflected in the literature of the time, on the other it provided the impetus for radical social reforms – especially pertaining to women. Spanning the century, three landmark legislations – spearheaded by visionary reformers and supported by liberal British Governor-generals – sought to bring about a revolutionary change in the lives of women. Not surprisingly, all of them had to do with marriage and sexuality: in 1829, 'Sati' (the practice of burning widows on the funeral pyre of their husbands) was abolished by Lord

1 Chatterjee 2012.
2 Ray 1964.
3 Ghosh 2012.
4 Q 2012.
5 One of the most interesting books on the subject in the current decade – one that explores the cultural phenomenon through its principal figures – has been Dasgupta 2011.

William Bentick, spurred by Raja Rammohun Roy's tireless campaign against the inhuman practice; 1856 saw the passing of 'The Hindu Widows' Remarriage Act' by Lord Canning, a legislation that would not have been possible without Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar's deep empathy for and relentless efforts in trying to end the misery of child widows[6]; and in 1891, 'The Age of Consent Act' was passed, that raised the age of consent for sexual intercourse for all girls in British India from ten to twelve years. (The violation of the first and third were punishable criminal offences). By this time (late nineteenth century, i. e.), as Tanika Sarkar has argued, middle class Hindus in Bengal "... were turning quite decisively towards a Hindu cultural indigenism and nationalism, from a more socially-questioning and self-critical earlier era".[7] A fallout of that cultural nationalism, according to Partha Chatterjee,[8] was that a sharp distinction was now being made by nationalists between the private and public domains, between home and the world: women were increasingly seen as the repositories of Indian culture and tradition and the appointed guardians of the sanctity of the home which they had to protect against the intrusion of western (British colonial) values. Their chief function was still to bring up children, but with the spread of female literacy, women were also awakening to other expressions of the self. In the marital relationship itself, there was a subtle change in the profile of the woman – from being just a dutiful wife to being a pleasant companion. This was particularly true of upper middle class and Brahmo women who have a significant presence in Tagore's novels. Charulata, the protagonist of *Nastanirh*, happens to be one of them.[9]

3 Ray's film

Nastanirh was published in 1901[10]; it is an autobiographical story set in the 1870s dealing with Tagore's relationship with his sister-in-law, Kadambari Devi. Satyajit Ray, while adapting the novella on celluloid, set the story specifically in 1878 – the year Gladstone returned to power in Britain, which Charulata's husband celebrates in Calcutta, the capital of the British Raj. Bhupati (Sailen Mukherjee) is editor and publisher of an English daily, *The Sentinel*, which he brings out with

6 For a critical biography of the reformer, see: Hatcher 2014.
7 Sarkar 2003.
8 Chatterjee 1993.
9 Tagore 1910; 1929. Some of the other popular Brahmo heroines in Tagore's novels are Sucharita in *Gora* (1910), and Labonya in *Shesher Kabita* (The Last Poem, 1929).
10 Tagore 1901.

great enthusiasm and moral integrity, but little business sense. He is steeped in his work and has no time for his much younger wife, Charulata (Madhabi Mukherjee), who spends her days reading Bankimchandra's novels (which were all the rage in Bengal then, especially with women readers), embroidering, and supervising the household. Enter Amol (Soumitra Chatterjee), Bhupati's cousin: a young college student, who arrives in their home on a stormy afternoon in April, and soon after, storms his way into Charu's heart. The bonding in their case is primarily literary – it is a shared love of literature and especially the aspiration to be a writer that brings them together. But it is bound to end in heartache: for Charu feels rising passion for a man for whom Bengali society permits only a certain playful affection (i. e. in the relation between *boudi* and *debar*, or elder sister-in-law and younger brother-in-law). It is clearly a transgression to go beyond that. Besides, Amol is after all only a visitor, bound to leave, apart from being an eligible bachelor to boot. Indeed, soon after he bonds with his *bouthan* (an older variant of *boudi*), he finds a tempting marriage proposal offered to him on a platter, one where his prospective father-in-law offers to sponsor his legal education in England. It is an offer no Bengali of Amol's generation could ignore, but he bravely does. However, he flees from Charu's home when he sees Bhupati being betrayed by Charu's brother (who embezzles a large amount of money) and does not want to add his own. Charu is devastated by his sudden absence, but realizes the reason and comes to terms with her life. The couple go for a change to Puri and decide to start a new paper, part political and part literary. They are now all set for a new life, one where Charu would share her husband's work and not just be a bystander. But on their return, they get a letter from Amol (saying he is in Madras and well) reading which Charu breaks down, unable to contain her repressed emotions anymore. Bhupati accidentally sees it and realizes what he has not understood all along. He rushes out, madly roaming the city in a carriage, crying to himself; back home, a hesitant Charu opens the door of the inner quarters for him, and holds out her hand. He is about to take it … but the camera freezes at this point. We are left guessing the outcome.

4 *Charulata* 2011

In *Charulata 2011*, the protagonist's name is Chaiti (Rituparna Sengupta); and like Ray's heroine, she too is the wife of a newspaper editor (Bikram/Arjun Chakraborty). She assumes the name 'Charulata 2011' while writing to her virtual friend, Amol, who also does not use his real name. The two meet on Facebook and then start writing emails to each other.

The narrative time-frame covers nine months of the year 2011. In February, the virtual friends start writing to each other; in April, Chaiti has a miscarriage; in May, we are shown another long email exchange; in June, Chaiti's brother and sister-in-law arrive; they are still there in July when Amol announces he is coming down to Kolkata for a seminar and wants to meet her; they meet and on the very first day realize that he is her brother-in-law (her husband's cousin), Sanjoy; he being a visiting relative, they live under the same roof for more than a week, the last few days of which are spent alone together; but he leaves abruptly, not wishing to prolong (what he calls) a 'hypocrisy'; Chaiti is distraught but Bikram has a heart attack soon after, in September, and the couple go to Puri to help him recover; in October, Chaiti discovers she is pregnant and tries to confess her affair to her husband, but is unable to; however, he accidentally comes to know of it while using her Mac one day; he goes mad and tries to throttle her in a moment of rage, but she saves herself by saying the child is his; meanwhile, Sanjoy writes to inform that he is marrying a girl he has himself chosen in London, and encouraged by her friends, Chaiti accommodates to her old domestic life.

The epigraph of the film is a quote from Bankinmchandra, not Rabindranath – a line from the novel *Bisbriksha* (The Poison Tree, 1873)[11]: *"Jotodin manusher asha thake, totodin kicchui phurai na. Asha phuraile, shob phurailo"* (As long as there is hope in one's life, nothing is lost. The end of hope is the end of everything). This acts as the leitmotif of the film. While Amol/Sanjoy's voiceover recites the line, we see Chaiti on the Puri beach – lonely against a vast sea with ominous grey clouds on the horizon. She visits Puri with her husband, but it is this image of her alone against the backdrop of the sea (shown at several key moments in the film) that is imprinted on the viewer's mind.

If we take a close look at the film, then we will see that it dramatizes a glocalized narrative, where Chaiti is constantly shown to either consciously negotiate or unconsciously live out an uneasy juxtaposition of a globalized outlook on the world with the entrapment of age-old social obligations in her self. The details of her life bear this out with great transparency.

Her home and the world she inhabits are both glocal. When at home, she lives in a house with aesthetic Indian décor and ruled by English manners. They have English breakfast, their dinner starts with soup and ends with pudding, she bakes butter cookies for guests, and her husband serves whisky from Hong Kong. When out, she buys provisions from the supermarket, travels in chauffeur-driven AC cars, and hangs out in posh cafés. Her world is surrounded with friends with whom she can easily share her secrets – one is a dancer and the

11 Chatterjee 1873.

other a Radio Jockey (Rituparna Sen). While the latter dresses in plunging necklines, smokes and casually carries condoms in her purse, Chaiti herself is dressed in sarees and Indian clothes.

Her bedroom is dominated by a huge flat screen TV (which is constantly on, from morning till night) and an equally large LCD monitor, which she uses to write emails or check recipes. In addition, she has a Mac, which she uses when she is in the drawing room. The Mac, too, is constantly on, even when Chaiti talks to her visiting relatives, so that her conversation seems only an interruption in her internet surfing. She complains about her husband's preoccupation with his work, but even he enjoys his whisky and conversation without recourse to the internet while she cannot. *Charulata 2011* is thus, in a way, representative of the new Bengali middle-class cinema of the post-economic reform period, where, according to Moinal Biswas, "Realism continues to be a yardstick ... but curiously, it is now a realism committed to the details of the new urban interior and spaces of consumption opening up for gated communities".[12]

Chaiti's house is however quintessentially Indian in one respect – it is peopled with dependants: poor relatives and needy servants. The female poor relative is really a subtle extension of the servant. One is left in no doubt of the power relation between Chaiti and her brother's wife, Keya, who comes ostensibly to give her company, but is never treated as an equal. She is supposed to chip in her bit in the household work, depending on Chaiti's mood. She helps to clean Chaiti's bookcase, offers to do the breakfast, and takes care of Sanjoy when Chaiti ignores him, but is chided for doing it incorrectly, the moment Chaiti deems it fit to re-assume the role of the mistress of the house, in rightful charge of her guest's well being. Chaiti is well-read, more educated and more attractive of the two women – but what governs their relationship is the fact that she is a richer man's wife, hence perfectly justified to heap small indignities on her sister-in-law.

She is also mistress of the house in the typical Indian sense – like most well-to-do homemakers in India, she supervises the smooth functioning of the household with the help of servants, without doing any of the housework herself. There is a part-time young maid who comes to sweep and swab, and a live-in domestic help, an elderly lady who cooks and takes care of everything else in the house – from what will be cooked to which saree Chaiti will wear before a special guest.

Chaiti is shown to be upset about the fact that she is responsible for everything in the house: when the lift is not functioning or the hand-shower is not

12 Biswas 2013 – http://www.frontline.in/arts-and-culture/cinema/rich-tradition/article5189802.ece?homepage = true (30/9/19).

working; she is the one who has to contact the required labourer and get things done. Her husband has no input. But it is quite plain to the viewer that Chaiti has plenty of hired help as her dialogues are constantly interrupted by her instructions to others to do this or that thing.

5 Charu vs. Chaiti

Of the two protagonists, Charulata seems to have a **stronger sense of self** than Chaiti. And she is lonelier. Her treatment of her sister-in-law (Manda) is the same, but she does not have the friends that Chaiti has – a liberated woman and a male confidante, with whom she can share everything, from the miscarriage to the affair to the second pregnancy.

Charulata's **loneliness** is established by Ray at the very beginning of his film in an unforgettable sequence of cinematic brilliance. The first few minutes tell us all about her life that can be known, without a single word. In Ray's own words, quoted by Andrew Robinson, it "... attempts to use a language entirely free from literary and theatrical influences. Except for one line of dialogue in its seven minutes, the scene says what it has to say in terms that speak to the eye and the ear."[13] Robinson devotes an entire page to the analysis of this scene. I will not be able to do it better; the only point I would like to highlight is the agility in Charu's movements. She is at home, and is undoubtedly bored, but hers is a kind of animated boredom: her mind is restless, her body active. Even her bedroom seems just another site of activity rather than rest. When on bed, she sits straight and embroiders or she plays cards with Manda; but even there, she is driven by the will to win, the game is not just a relaxed afternoon ritual with her. In contrast, Chaiti is far more languid in her movements. It comes out strikingly in Chatterjee's very interesting take on Ray's famous introductory scene in *Charulata*. His is much shorter, though, just about a minute – where we are shown a bored Chaiti spending her time in her bedroom, reading a newspaper, messaging on her smart phone, having tea, calling her husband, watching TV, reading a book, writing an email on her computer, filing her nails. Except for the email, she does everything else on the bed, and mostly either reclining or lying down. This scene of utter boredom is followed by one of masturbation, which is a rare occurrence in a Bengali film (even by today's standards in an industry where the depiction of kissing and love scenes are quite common).

13 Robinson 1989.

The **spaces** that the two heroines inhabit are also significant. Though Ray gives us a very good idea of the huge mansion that Charu lives in, her daily life is actually lived out in the bedroom, the corridor and the garden. If there is the shuttered protection of the home for her, there is also the freedom of the open, sunlit garden with its swing, which is the site of some of the best moments in the film. It is thus entirely appropriate, as Marie Seton has presciently pointed out, that Charu should realize "the passion that has been stirred within her" here rather than in her "somewhat claustrophobic" *andarmahal*.[14] There is however no equivalent of the swing in Chaiti's life. She can go out in the world, no doubt; but the car and the café – like her home – are also confining somehow. The only outdoors that is common to both is Puri, but it only seems to further entrench Chaiti's feeling of loneliness.

Charu's **childlessness** is an understated fact in Ray's film; its poignancy conveyed in one deft stroke when Charu, sitting on her swing, sees a mother cuddling a baby through her lorgnette. But it only serves to accentuate her attention towards her brother-in-law, which leads to a moment of truth – her recognition of her love for Amol. Charu is lonely, but there is nothing in the film to suggest that her loneliness would end with a child. It is Charu as wife and beloved, and Charu as a budding author that we remember her. In Chaiti, the child and the lover are connected – at least in her mind. When she has a miscarriage soon after commencing her virtual relationship, she sees it as a punishment for her affair and says so to her friends; at the end of the film, she is shown to be pregnant again, but we are not sure whose child it is. Her friends assume it is Sanjoy's, but she tells Bikram it is his.

In the case of Charu, Amol's contact leads to an **awakening** – encouraged by him (and also to prove to him that she can), she begins to write; whereas with Chaiti, the virtual romance only leads to the temporary satisfaction of a desire. We see no internal evolution or emotional development in her, only a kind of resigned acceptance of her lot and a painful effort not to abandon hope. This is partly because she is overwhelmed by gratitude for her husband, who, as her friends remind her, took care of her after her parents passed away, and who, even after being betrayed by her brother Utpal, whom he had generously helped, did not use it against her.

Charu and Chaiti both experience the pang of loss, but the **ending** of their stories are very different. Ray's film is open ended: hence, hope is as much a possibility as despair. And Chatterjee's film begins and ends with the quote from Bankim on the power of hope. But as Chidananda Dasgupta has observed, what is striking about Charu is that, "In her reconciliation with her husband, there is

14 Seton 2011 [1971].

no sense of guilt, only a recognition of reality."[15] And it is perhaps here, more than in any other respect, that the difference between Charu and Chaiti as individuals comes out.

6 Contrasting two modernities in Bengal: The colonial and the glocal

Charu and Chaiti, as the above discussion amply demonstrates, represent two kinds of modernities in Bengal – the colonial and glocal. The intertextuality with Tagore, and especially Ray, allows Chatterjee to contrast – albeit implicitly – these two modernities over the course of a century. The result is an interesting one.

As mentioned earlier in the introduction, by the late nineteenth century, the idea of the companionate wife had taken root in Bengal. And Charu in Tagore's *Nastanirh* provides a good model for it. As we see, she is an efficient home maker as she is supposed to be, but she is also an able companion to her husband (when he can give her company, that is)! She is an ardent admirer of Bankimchandra (the foremost Bengali novelist of the time), is well versed in the literary currents of the day and has a latent literary aspiration herself. It is colonial modernity that gives her a rudimentary education, which in turn enables her to aspire to be a writer – in other words, to find meaning beyond her domestic duties. In Amol's presence, she awakens to love (the love and passion that is missing in her own marriage and which she vicariously experiences through Bankim's novels), but also to a new sense of self – with the latent writer in her coming to the surface.

In the 1870's, Charu had to choose between being a 'prachina' or a 'nabina' (that is, being a woman in the traditional mould or the new woman). She veers towards being the latter, but cannot forego the former. This tussle between tradition and modernity that we see in Charu is present in Chaiti as well. For more than a 100 years in India, women seem to be battling the same issue – though in new guises. The tradition part remains (more or less) the same; the modernity keeps changing – from colonial to postcolonial to glocal.

The concept of the 'glocal' and 'glocalisation' – as first theorised by the sociologist Roland Robertson in the early 1990s – refers to a process that combines the concerns of localism with the forces of globalization. It other words, it represents a local adaptation and interpretation of global forces. As Robertson clarifies in a paper written two decades after he introduced the idea in

15 Dasgupta 1994 [1980].

his field, glocalisation constitutes a "refinement of the concept of globalisation"[16]– emphasizing the fact that it does not necessarily lead to cultural homogenisation

Chaiti, in *Charulata 2011*, quite obviously enjoys the benefits of a globalized world, especially in being a participant in its consumer culture. This is, however, in the realm of quotidian life. But in the realm of personal relationships, too, she explores a global new trend while embarking on a virtual relationship with a stranger. But, in her case, it gets (unconsciously) adapted to – or rather subsumed by – the overarching partriarchal conditioning of her life. It doesn't give rise to the kind of open, indeterminate relationship that the virtual world is supposed to enable – on the contrary, it has drastic consequences for her.

Chaiti has the same need for love and desire that Charu had and the internet opens up infinite possibilities to fulfil it, no doubt. Technology expands her choice in 2011: she romances the strange and the unknown – an unseen tall dark stranger with a gift for words. However, the irony is that though her life apparently seems to have more possibilities, it actually does not. The email lends an extra dimension to an extra-marital affair, no doubt – but Chaiti, (the Charulata of 2011), with her Mac and 24-hour connectivity with her virtual Amol, still wrestles with the obligations of being a wife. While the gadgets in her house have increased in addition to the servants that Charu had a century ago, her situation has not: in both their cases, the lover eventually departs, and duty ultimately wins over passion, bringing back the duly chastened wife to the wronged husband.

An even greater irony lies in the fact that there is a vast gap in what the director Agnidev Chatterjee proclaims to have done in the film and the film itself – at least in my reading of it. In an interview given to 'The Times of India' soon after its release, Chatterjee had said that though an extra-marital relationship hurts the other partner, we have to admit that "times are changing and so is our morality. That's what the film shows"; and on being compared with Charulata, he said: "My film has nothing to do with Ray's film. It's about Chaiti who speaks her mind; the film celebrates woman power."[17] "Women power" has actually been celebrated by other filmmakers in characters who may be said to be Chaiti's forbears. And though Chatterjee's film undoubtedly portrays the pain of a lonely wife sympathetically, the only time that Chaiti speaks her mind is when she asks: "If a girl can love two men equally, where's the harm in that?" But in saying so, she was contradicting herself – for just a month back, she had told her friends that she believed that her recent miscarriage was a punishment for her cyber affair.

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16 Robertson 2012.

17 http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/entertainment/bengali/movie-reviews/Charuulata-2011/movie-review/12144080.cms (30/9/19).

Her husband, while arguing with her brother (Utpal/Kaushik Sen) about the importance of integrity and values in life, had opined: that honesty and trust between a married couple is very important, as the sanctity of the basic unity of the family, with the couple and child, was symptomatic of the sanctity of society (*brihattoro samaj*) as a whole – which was, after all, an extension of the family. This is as fiery a championing of heteronormativity as can be, obliterating the possibility of any other kind of relationship between human beings.

It is Chaiti's lover who speaks in the language of the times. In one of their exchanges, he writes – he finds it unacceptable that a girl of her education and talents should waste her energy in just cooking and domestic work. "No Charu", he says, "this is wrong, unfair, unjust." To which Chaiti retorts: "Who told you that being at home means being unproductive? And that housework needs no talent? If you visit my home, you will find every nook and corner stamped with my personality."

In between the colonial and the glocal, there has been postcolonial modernity – in the shape of the modern working woman. And we see the particularly fraught negotiation between tradition and postcolonial modernity in the protagonists of the three classic films by the three gurus of Bengali cinema – Neeta in Ritwik Ghatak's *Meghe Dhaka Tara* (The Cloud-Capped Star, 1960)[18]; Arati in Satyajit Ray's *Mahanagar* (The Great City, 1963)[19]; and Chinu in Mrinal Sen's *Ekdin Pratidin* (And Quiet Rolls the Dawn, 1979).[20]

But Chaiti has other forbears in Bengali cinema. The most obvious being *Paroma* (1981) – Aparna Sen's cult film about the adulterous affair of a very traditional middle-class housewife and mother of three with a much younger man (her nephew's friend).[21] Aparna Sen's films stand, as Brinda Bose and Prasanta Chakrabarty have argued, in a "liminal space" between the classics of Ray-Ghatak-Sen and the "specious B-grade popular cinema" that were the staple of the 1980s and much of the 90s.[22] A recurrent theme in Sen's work has been the exploration of the many hues of love, of romantic/meaningful relationships beyond marriage. What is striking about them is the indeterminacy of the relationships and the narratives (in which they are very postmodern); and the agency that some of the women have. Paromita, Mrs Iyer and Mrinalini – eponymous heroines all[23] – find love outside marriage, a love that helps them

18 Ghatak 1960.
19 Ray 1963.
20 Sen 1979.
21 Sen 1984.
22 Bose/Chakrabarty 2012.
23 Sen 2000; 2002; 2011.

evolve as human beings. Paromita (incidentally played by the same actor who plays Chaiti in Chatterjee's film), particularly, strikes us with her emotional growth and strength, as she does what Paroma could not – come out of a stifling marriage and start a new life, even after facing the trauma of losing a child.[24]

Chaiti does not have this agency. She is entrapped in her traditional self even as she embraces a global lifestyle, making the film an interesting dramatization of the glocal.

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